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AUTHOR Stroman, Carolyn A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In light of the Kerner Commission's (1968) recommendations that Blacks be included more frequently on television and in a diversity of roles, a study examined how the portrayal of Blacks on television has changed since 1968 and how Blacks are currently portrayed in commercial television series. Samples of all national network commercial television series containing a regular Black character and aired during prime time in the 1987-1988 Fall season were videotaped and utilized in the analysis. This resulted in 26 shows, featuring 58 recurring Black characters. Variables coded included two types of information: characteristics of individual characters--such as age, gender, occupation, type of role played; and characteristics of individual programs--such as type of program (comedy, drama, adventure), type of setting, location of setting, and racial composition of the setting. Results indicated that a more positive portrayal of Blacks is emerging. Major findings include the following: (1) Black males and females were nearly equally represented, and Blacks were likely to appear on prime-time television; (2) Black characters were likely to appear in a situation comedy as a generally competent member of a middle class, two-parent family; and (3) Black characters were likely to appear in a predominantly Black setting in an urban area in the North. These findings contrast with earlier programming in which Black male characters vastly outnumbered Black female characters, and in which Blacks were repeatedly portrayed as incompetent and lower-class. (Two tables of data, five footnotes, and 22 references are attached.) (ARH)

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Twenty Years Later: The Portrayal of Blacks on Prime-Time Television

by

Carolyn A. Stroman
Center for Communications Research

Bishetta Merritt
Paula Matabane
Radio, Television, and Film Department

School of Communications
Howard University

Presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988.

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The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, hereafter referred to as the Kerner Commission, was formed in August 1967 to investigate the racial disturbances that occurred in American cities during the 1960s. The Commission was also responsible for developing recommendations geared toward preventing future disturbances. Delivering its report in March 1968, the Commission chided white America for creating, maintaining, and condoning societal conditions that precipitated the disturbances. The media were among the institutions cited as having a role in the creation of a schism between Black and white Americans.

The present research is concerned with the response of one medium--television--to the criticisms and recommendations of the Kerner Commission. Specifically, the Commission, in its 1968 report, made the following recommendations regarding Blacks and television:

> Television should develop programming which integrates Negroes into all aspects of televised presentations.... In addition to news-related programming, we think that Negroes should

> appear more frequently in dramatic and comedy series (p. 212).

In essence, the Commission was recommending that Blacks be included more frequently on television and in a diversity of roles. This research, then, revolves around the response of television to the Kerner Commission's recommendations. Specifically, it has as its research questions the following: (1) How has the portrayal of Blacks on television changed since the publication of the Kerner Commission report; and (2) How are Blacks currently portrayed in commercial television series?

Background

Before examining present-day portrayals of Blacks, it may be instructive to analyze, by reviewing previous research, the participation and portrayal of Blacks on television since the publication of the Kerner Commission report in 1968. Television, in particular, was affected by, and in turn, affected the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. As a result, there was an increase in Black visibility on television (Roberts, 1970-71; Seggar, 1977). For example, the proportion of non-white (generally Black) characters appearing on commercial television increased from 6.6 percent

in 1969 to 12.5 percent in 1974 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977).

In addition to providing data on the representativeness of Blacks appearing on television, past research has identified some of the demographic characteristics and role attributes associated with Black television characters. Such research has reached the following relevant conclusions regarding the sex and age of Black television characters:

- Black male characters vastly outnumbered Black female characters (Hinton, et al., 1974; Northcott, Seggar and Hinton, 1975; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977; Seggar, Hafen, and Hannonen-Gladden, 1981).

- Blacks, especially males, were more likely to appear in teenage roles or as young characters (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1979).

The occupational roles to which Blacks have been assigned have varied. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Blacks were most likely to be casts as maids or handymen. Apparently, efforts were later made to show Blacks in a variety of occupations; at the beginning of the 1970s, Blacks were frequently featured in high status professions and in glamorous occupations related to law enforcement and entertainment fields (Northcott, Seggar and Hinton, 1975; Roberts, 1970-71; Seggar and

Wheeler, 1973). It should be noted, however, that Blacks on television were less likely than whites to have an identifiable job or to be a professional, administrator, or manager (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980).

The differential treatment accorded Blacks and whites in terms of occupational portrayal resulted in whites comprising 75 percent of the television characters with the highest socioeconomic status (SES), while Blacks comprised 75 percent of the lowest SES characters (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980). Moreover, as was indicated in the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' study (1977), 61.5 percent of those portrayed on television as very poor are non-white.

Research also indicates that the majority of Blacks on television appeared in situation comedies, and half of all Black characters appeared in predominantly Black shows (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980). To illustrate, nearly half of the Black characters appearing on television in Fall 1977 appeared in six Black shows, with the other half widely dispersed (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980). Wiegel, Loomis, and Soja (1980) further noted that Black-white interactions constituted less

than 2% of prime-time programming.

Furthermore, Blacks were likely to be cast in insignificant roles that are not central to the plot (Culley and Bennett, 1976; Hinton, et al., 1974). Black women in particular were likely to assume a minor role; during the period 1969-1974, there were only 20 non-white female major characters compared to 111 white female major characters (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977). Stroman (1983) documents that fewer than 30 Black females have appeared in starring roles on television from 1968 to 1983.

Finally, when Blacks are portrayed as belonging to a family, seldom are they portrayed in an intact family (Greenberg and Neuendorf, 1980). In an examination of Black family shows appearing from 1969 to 1982, Stroman (1986) noted that most of the families were single-parent families (generally female-headed), and few portrayed a lifestyle other than that of a poor struggling Black family.

In an effort to determine television's response to the Kerner Commission's recommendations, we conducted a content analysis of television shows. Our data collection had two main purposes: (1) to

document the present-day portrayal of Blacks on television, and (2) to provide, in one study, more comprehensive data on the context in which Blacks are portrayed.

Methods

A sample week of all national network commercial television series containing a regular Black character and aired during prime time (8-11 p.m.) in the 1987-88 Fall season was videotaped and utilized in the analysis.[1] This resulted in 26 shows, featuring 58 recurring Black characters. Results reported in this analysis are based on one episode of each show.

Variables coded included two types of information: (1) characteristics of individual characters; and (2) characteristics of individual programs. Character attributes included demographic information such as age, gender, socio-economic status (based on signs of affluence within the setting of each show and/or occupation), and occupation. Coded also was the physical depiction of women characters (obese, normal, or thin), and the clothing style of characters (showy,

well-dressed, or ordinary). We also coded the kind of role played by such characters (major, supporting, or minor), whether the character was in a serious or comic role, and whether the character was a member of a family.

Program attributes included the type of program (situation comedy, drama, or action-adventure); the type of setting (home, work, other); the location of the setting (urban, suburban/East, North, etc.); and the racial composition of the setting.

In general, category definitions were those used by the primary analysts of Black portrayals: Bradley Greenberg and associates and John Seggar and associates.[2] The only categories not used in previous research were region and type of neighborhood, i.e., urban or suburban. Both of these variables were determined by the city in which the show was shot, e.g., "Crime Story" is shot in Las Vegas and was thus coded urban and West.

Coding was done by three persons, who sometimes worked in pairs but most frequently as a threesome, with each coder responsible for coding certain variables. The reliability coefficients were derived by calculating the percentage of agreement among independently coded

observations. Intercoder reliability checks were done periodically; reliability scores were never less than .80 and generally exceeded .90 for all categories. The categories with the lowest reliabilities (.80) were age and dress.[3]

Results

Table 1 contains an overview of the demographic characteristics of Black characters appearing on television during the Fall 1987-88 season. Unlike previous years when men vastly outnumbered women, the sex ratio is now about equal with females occupying slightly less than one-half of the character slots. No longer do young characters predominate. A sizeable 44 percent of the Black characters were over 35 years of age and 16 percent were over the age of 50.

As mentioned earlier, Blacks were generally portrayed in the lower classes. Today, however, Blacks on television are generally portrayed as belonging to the middle and upper classes. (See Table 1.) Similarly, today Blacks are seldom featured in low-status occupations. With the exception of policemen who comprised 25 percent of the sample, Blacks in the

professions (22%) are currently the largest occupational grouping. Parenthetically, it should be noted that the largest percentage of Blacks on television (38%) continue to be featured in a law enforcement-related role.

The physical depiction of Black characters has shifted. In previous years, Black women were more frequently than not portrayed as obese. In this sample of shows, however, only 14 percent of the women were obese, compared to 68 percent who were average in size and 18 percent who were thin. Additionally, while 14 percent of all of the characters were classified as showy dressers, 55 percent were considered well-dressed. The attire of 34 percent of the characters was categorized as ordinary.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of Blacks appearing on television in the current season are featured in mixed roles, i.e., they combine comedy and serious issues. It is worth noting that comic roles outweigh serious ones by only five percentage points (33 % and 28%). Related to this, 19 percent of Black characters are cast in major roles, with the majority (59%) cast as supporting actors and actresses.

In previous years, a number of Black characters were perceived as

portraying incompetent individuals. This has changed dramatically. In the current season, three-fourths of Black characters are portrayed as highly competent (22%) or generally competent (52%).[4]

Sixty percent of the characters are depicted as members of families. Of those whose family composition was depicted, the largest amount (58%) was depicted as belonging to a 2-parent family.[5]

Program attributes were also analyzed. As in past years, Blacks are still most likely to be cast in situation comedies. As can be seen from Table 2, Blacks seldom appear in dramatic presentations.

We were concerned with the settings in which Blacks occurred. As in previous years, the majority of Black characters appearing on television today appeared in predominantly Black settings. In fact, 52 percent of the characters in this sample appeared in four predominantly Black shows: "The Cosby Show," "Amen," "227" and "A Different World." The other 48 percent or 28 individuals were spread out over a total of 22 shows.

The results of the study may be summarized as follows: (1) Black males and females are especially likely to appear on prime-time television; (2) Black characters are likely to appear in a situation comedy

as a generally competent member of a middle class, 2-parent family; and (3) Black characters are likely to appear in a predominantly Black setting in an urban area in the North.

Discussion

A major concern of this study was to examine whether the portrayal of Blacks has changed since the publication of the Kerner Commission report. Findings of the study indicate a definite improvement in the manner in which Blacks are portrayed on television. Also the findings corroborate the results of a previous study (Merritt and Stroman, 1986) which suggest that a more positive portrayal of Black families is emerging.

In an early work, Clark (1969) identified the four stages through which minority portrayals on television pass. These stages are: nonrecognition, ridicule, regulation, and respect. Clearly, Blacks have gone through the first three stages, and while they have not achieved total respect, efforts are being exerted in the right direction.

Why is it important how Blacks are portrayed on television and in

other media? A great deal of the concern expressed about the portrayal of Blacks is related to the theoretical proposition that frequent exposure to the media may result in viewers developing values and beliefs about Blacks that are consonant with television portrayals. To illustrate, Graves (1980) maintains that if televised Blacks are presented in positive, non-stereotyped roles, the self-concept of Blacks who view these roles may be enhanced. However, if Blacks are portrayed in a manner which supports negative stereotypes of Blacks, the self-concept of Blacks viewing these portrayals may be lowered.

In addition to having implications for Black audiences, media coverage and portrayal of Blacks have implications for others. Unlike Blacks who have first-hand information of how Blacks function in "real life," other persons have little opportunity to observe Black family life directly. Hence, in many instances the only source for that type of information is the mass media, particularly television. For example, several studies indicate that white children and adult viewers who do not interact with Blacks report that they get their information about Blacks from television (Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg and Atkin, 1978; Greenberg

and Hanneman, 1970).

In sum, then, concern about the portrayal of Blacks on television is related to the assertion that media coverage and portrayal of Blacks have far-reaching effects. Indeed, this is what the Kerner Commission had in mind when it recommended that the media improve its coverage and portrayal of Blacks.

This study documented an improvement, i.e., more diversity in the portrayal of televised Blacks; this step in the direction of improved images of Blacks is to be applauded. Yet, this analysis could not conclude without some acknowledgement of the fact that many of the urban pathologies noted in the Kerner Commission report have worsened since 1968. And, thus, the question arises as to the effects of the current portrayal of Blacks vis-a-vis the current status of Black America and Black-white relations. We suggest that this is a very important question and one that should be a starting point for future inquiries in this area.

To be acknowledged also is the fact that in this sample, Black characters continue to be cast primarily in all Black settings; this is consistent with how they were portrayed in previous years. Yet, there is a

notable difference in that these all-Black settings tend to be upscale middle class rather than low income. While this represents a desirable break with the past, it may perpetuate the prevailing belief that low income settings are nonproductive crime enclaves of the poorly educated with few credible role models. It may reinforce dominant social values measuring human value by income and social class. The challenge might be for the medium to maintain social class (and racial) diversity without traditional class biases where working class settings are undervalued. When one considers the working class origins of Black notables such as Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks, Althea Gibson, Coleman Young, and others, it becomes clearer that television fiction has not captured the positive potential that exists in non-middle-class environments. We concur with Berry (1988), that televison has a great potential for promoting the strengths of multicultural experiences and by extension multiclass experiences.

Table 1

Demography and Role Attributes
of Black TV Characters

SEX	Percent
Female	48.0
Male	52.0
Age	
0-12	1.0
13-20	26.0
21-35	29.0
36-50	28.0
51 +	16.0
SES	
Upper	18.0
Middle	54.0
Working	28.0
OCCUPATION	
Professional	22.0
Managerial	9.0
Law Enforcement	38.0
Clerical	9.0
Others	22.0

Type of Role	Percent
Comic	33.0
Serious	28.0
Mixed	40.0
Role Importance	
Major	19.0
Supporting	59.0
Minor	22.0

N = 58

Table 2

Attributes of TV Programs Containing Black Characters

Program Types	Percent
Situation Comedy	69.0
Action-Adventure	21.0
Drama	10.0
Program Setting	
Home	28.0
Work	48.0
Other	24.0
Racial Composition of Setting	
Predominantly Black	52.0
Predominantly white	43.0
Mixed	5.0
Location of Setting	
North	55.0
South	21.0
East	5.0
West	11.0
Unknown	7.0

N = 26

Footnotes

1. Excluded from this analysis were sports, specials , variety shows, and movies. The rationale for selecting this time period was that Fall programming had become relatively stable by this point; the particular week was chosen because of our projections that none of the shows we were interested in would be pre-empted during this week. Thus, we judged this to be a representative week of programming containing Black portrayals.

2. See Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980; Greenberg and Neuendorf, 1980; Hinton, et al., 1974; Seggar, 1977; Seggar and Wheeler, 1973; Seggar, Hafen and Hannonen-Gladden, 1981.

3. The formula used in computing the coefficient of reliability was:

$$C.R. = \frac{3M}{N_1 + N_2 + N_3}$$

where M is the number of coding decisions on which the coders agreed, and $N_1 + N_2 + N_3$ refers to the number of coding decisions made by the three coders (Holsti, 1969).

4. Competence was defined as the classification of intelligence displayed through the ideas proposed or the actual successful and effective completion or carrying out of a task (Seggar, 1977).

5. Type of family was not depicted for 43% of the sample of Black characters.

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